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ABSTRACT

This guide introduces volunteer opportunities in the schools to older persons. The first section describes the challenges of meeting the needs of a generation at risk, preparing today's students to be tomorrow's workers, easing the pressures on overburdened schools, and generating support for education. The second section describes the opportunities for school partnerships, including information on volunteers in the schools, benefits to schools and communities, and bringing the generations together. The third section describes the commitment to becoming a school volunteer, either through working directly with students or working behind the scenes. Questions for potential volunteers to ask themselves and to ask the school program coordinator are included, along with lists of rights and expectations for volunteers. The resources section lists persons and organizations in the community that can provide information about school volunteer programs, along with three national organizations: Retired Senior Volunteer Program, ACTION; National Association of Partners in Education; and Volunteer--The National Center. (CML)

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BECOMING A SCHOOL PARTNER

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When a retired California educator named Ethel Percy Andrus founded the American Association of Retired Persons more than a quarter century ago, the organization adopted her credo: "To serve, not to be served." Today, AARP's vision reflects Dr. Andrus's philosophy "Bringing lifetimes of experience and leadership to serve all generations."

Few activities better symbolize these themes than the partnerships that volunteers are forging with schools across the country to help America's students become more knowledgeable citizens, skilled workers and contributing members of society. Some four million volunteers, many of them older persons, are donating their time and talents to thousands of schools through volunteer programs organized by school districts, local governments, community groups and businesses.

AARP invites you to pledge your commitment to the next generation. We urge you to join in this effort by becoming involved in the schools and with our children upon whose shoulders the future rests.

HORACE B. DEETS
Executive Director

AMERICA'S SCHOOLS NEED YOU!

Volunteer opportunities in the schools are as varied as the experiences of the volunteers themselves. Tutors, mentors, teachers' aides, after-school club advisors and special project organizers are reading to youngsters, challenging gifted students to excel, befriending lonely children and confused teenagers, sharing professional skills and life experiences and generating community support for school budgets and programs. Volunteers, in turn, report that their work in the schools renews their sense of purpose and rekindles their enthusiasm for life.

You do not need special skills to be a successful volunteer. Patience, empathy and a generous spirit are the greatest gifts you can offer a young child who needs extra help, a teenager who needs guidance or a teacher who needs a helping hand.

This guide will introduce you to some of the challenges facing students and schools, describe the opportunities open to older volunteers in local elementary and secondary schools and discuss the rewards of school volunteer activities.

The next step is up to you. Take advantage of exciting new volunteer opportunities in your community and make a difference in the lives of children who need your help by becoming an active school partner.

By sharing the experiences and lessons of your lifetime with young people, you can make an enormous contribution to their future.

THE CHALLENGE: MEETING THE NEEDS OF A GENERATION AT RISK

Our individual well-being, the vitality of our communities and the economic health of our nation are linked to the quality of American education. When our children succeed in life, we all benefit. By doing all we can to help the schools, we are investing in our own future security as well.

For children and youth of all ages and backgrounds, a good education is the stepping stone to a better life. No one put it better than Hubert Humphrey who once said, "The road to freedom here and everywhere on earth begins in the classroom." Preparing today's students for tomorrow's challenge is crucial.

In most communities, the school system needs volunteers. The increase in the number of mothers employed outside the home has made them unavailable to serve as school volunteers, as they have done traditionally in the past. Resources are being stretched to cover the basics, increasing the demands on teachers and reducing the potential for one-to-one interaction with individual children. Older persons offer experience, skill, patience and time. As volunteers, they can help meet many needs.

PREPARING TODAY'S STUDENTS TO BE TOMORROW'S WORKERS

We need a new generation of highly skilled workers to ensure that America can continue to thrive in competitive international markets. Unfortunately, many of today's high-school graduates cannot assume even the most basic jobs in U.S. business and industry.

Recent reports show that:

- 60% of high school graduates are not prepared for entry-level jobs;
- U.S. businesses are spending billions each year to train and retrain workers, some of it on basic math and reading skills their employees should have learned in elementary school.
- literacy has become an increasingly important social issue. About one in five adults lacks the basic skills and knowledge to function in society, while 40 million are marginally illiterate.

As America continues to move toward an information service economy using computers and other high-tech equipment, the complexity of the workplace increases, making greater literacy demands on workers than ever before. The changing workplace requirements generated by our information economy also mean that new demands are being made on schools, especially urban schools. Thus, part of paying attention to education is paying attention to the problem of illiteracy.

America's teachers are better trained and classroom materials and technologies are more sophisticated than ever before, but the most talented and best-equipped teachers in the world cannot solve all of the problems facing children and youth today.

Each day, classrooms are full of students struggling to cope with the effects of living in poverty, with handicaps and language barriers, with the temptation to abuse drugs and alcohol and in danger of violence at home and in the streets. Many children fare only slightly better at home, where two-income families and single parents may be too busy, distracted or troubled to help with homework or listen to problems.

We expect teachers to communicate effectively with classes full of children who speak dozens of languages and dialects, but not English. We require that they meet the needs of physically handicapped, learning disabled and exceptionally gifted children—in addition to other students. We ask them to instill values, responsibility and self-respect. In short, we expect teachers—and many of their students—to perform miracles.

Many teachers, already laden with classroom responsibilities and paperwork, are unable to give the individual attention and encouragement that their students may need to do well in school.

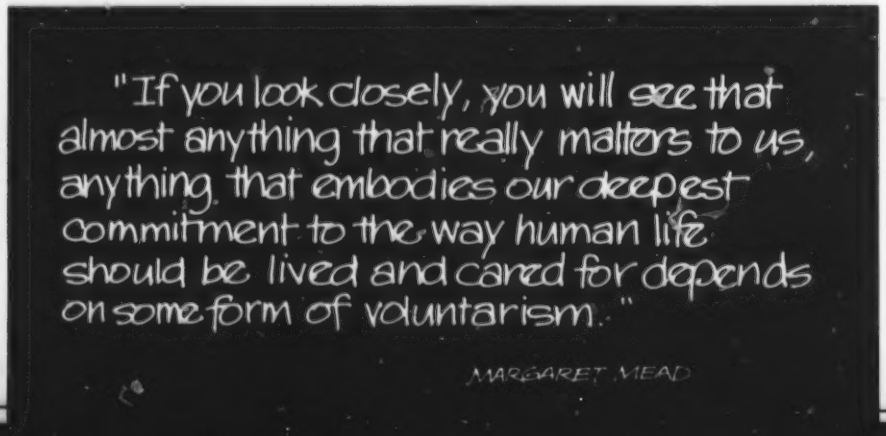
EASING PRESSURES ON OVERBURDENED SCHOOLS

GENERATING SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

The federal government has spent considerable time and money documenting the failure of the schools at the same time that it has substantially cut funds for public education. While elected officials at state and local levels press for educational reform, many also vote for belt-tightening measures that reduce school budgets.

In addition, citizen support for the schools is eroding in many communities. Only about a quarter of U.S. households have children in public schools, and most parents are too busy to get involved as volunteers or PTA members. Voter initiatives to cut property taxes (which fund local schools) and against school bond issues also reduce school funding levels. While many citizens complain about the state of public education, few make the connection between the schools' shortcomings and their own failure to support local education initiatives.

On the one hand, we know it's unfair to ask our schools to overcome such obstacles all by themselves. But on another, we expect that they do just that.


"If you look closely, you will see that almost anything that really matters to us, anything that embodies our deepest commitment to the way human life should be lived and cared for depends on some form of voluntarism."
MARGARET MEAD

THE OPPORTUNITY: SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

It is clear that the schools cannot work alone to meet the needs of children and youth. We must assume a shared approach to education, in which parents and other citizens, government, businesses, community groups and foundations pitch in to help the schools nurture, educate and inspire students.

Almost a quarter of all older persons do some sort of volunteer work in their communities. More than four million volunteers worked in schools and colleges during the 1987–88 school year. Among these school volunteers were parents, older persons, business executives, government and military employees, members of community groups, handicapped persons and students from secondary schools and colleges.

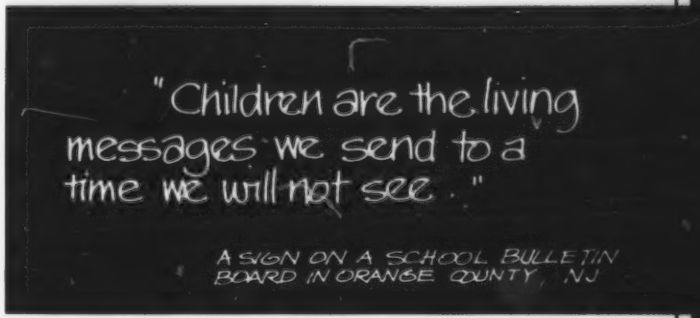
Thousands of local alliances with schools have sprung up in communities across the nation in the past decade, determined to help boost student achievement levels. These school partnerships range from ambitious multi-city business partnership programs funded by major corporations to individual efforts by volunteers in neighborhood schools.

Experience has shown that school volunteers are making a difference—one student at a time.

While teachers know their students need and deserve extra attention, few have the time to provide it, particularly after children leave the relatively cozy atmosphere of primary school for the more impersonal environment of intermediate, middle- or junior-high and high school. Older volunteers can help bridge this gap.

"Sometimes just the comforting presence of an older person is enough to help youngsters in need," explained one teacher in a school for exceptional children. "Students need someone with whom they can feel emotionally safe. If you're their teacher, they might not want to cry in front of you." A school principal reported that when older volunteers ate in the cafeteria with students, 95 percent of the discipline problems disappeared.

While young children are often more openly responsive to older volunteers, it is adolescents who particularly need mentors and role models. Many young people make critical choices during this period that affect their entire lives—decisions often clouded by confusion, passion and anger. Older volunteers can help teenagers by offering comfort, stability and advocacy on their behalf.



Few volunteers need proof to convince them that their efforts are worthwhile. Most school tutors and mentors are able to share at least one personal experience in which they watched a child flourish in the course of a semester or school year. There's the teenager who still skips classes occasionally, for example, but who never misses a tutoring session. There's the youngster who still stumbles over words but who is now eager to read, and the withdrawn child who gradually has started to confide his hopes and fears. There's the student whose determination to drop out of school has been replaced by a fervent desire to graduate. And there's the once-pessimistic child whose horizons now extend far beyond the streets of his neighborhood.

There is no end to the need for school volunteers. "Volunteers can be a godsend," notes a school administrator. "They bring so much life experience into the classroom, and help students relate what they learn in class to life skills they'll need in the real world." In addition to expressing gratitude for volunteers' help in the classroom, teachers report that volunteers' enthusiasm and fresh approach help renew their own commitment to teaching and to students.

By aiding teachers and counselors, volunteers help school professionals do their jobs better and stretch limited staff and financial resources. Outside the classroom, volunteers can help schools raise badly needed funds and encourage local businesses and foundations to donate equipment and materials that help equip students with the tools they need to excel in academic subjects, learn job skills and nurture their talents.

Volunteers also act as important bridges between schools and the community. Through their personal involvement in the schools, volunteers come to recognize the problems that teachers and principals face and can explain these challenges to friends and family members who have little knowledge of local education issues.

BRINGING THE GENERATIONS TOGETHER

Historically, the family, with its extended network of generations and relations, was responsible for nurturing, educating and supporting its members. Older persons and children turned to each other for affection, companionship and help with small favors and big tasks. Families counted on the oldest generation to pass on customs and skills, to instill values and to ground children in their own family histories and traditions.

In today's mobile society, grandparents and children are often separated by busy schedules and miles of interstate highways. Children grow up with little or no contact with older people outside their families, and older persons who live alone or in communities with others their age seldom talk to children or teenagers. It is not surprising that the two generations often feel disconnected from one another.

Working with youngsters gives older people a renewed enthusiasm for life, a chance to pass on lessons learned and skills mastered during a lifetime of experience and offers an opportunity to make a real difference in a young person's life. Older persons provide a sense of continuity in an uncertain and often frightening world. The young have much to offer, too.

One 78-year-old widower said: "I could not have survived the long agony of my wife's death if I didn't have my kids at school. My hours with them gave me the strength to go on because they needed me."

"Contact with children is joyful, rejuvenating and meaningful," wrote a 68-year-old male volunteer. "I feel I appreciate life so much more now that I can see it through the eyes of children. They enrich my life and give it deeper meaning."

THE COMMITMENT: BECOMING A SCHOOL VOLUNTEER

The list of school volunteer opportunities is endless. It is limited only by the needs of the children and the interests of the volunteer.

Many volunteers like to work directly with students, tutoring them in a specific subject, serving as mentors and special friends, helping out in classrooms and on field trips, reading to young children and helping students with homework assignments. Other volunteers prefer to help in more indirect ways by serving on advisory committees, helping teachers plan student enrichment programs and working with parents to organize special events. Older persons who cannot leave their homes can also help in a variety of ways.

Some volunteers are able to spare only a few hours each month for school activities, while others can commit as much as several hours a day five days each week. The amount of time you wish to contribute is your choice.

WORKING DIRECTLY WITH STUDENTS

You do not need to be an expert in an academic subject to be an effective volunteer with students. Far more important is a genuine interest in children.

The American Association of School Administrators seeks the following qualities in school volunteers:

- cooperation, dependability and positive thinking
- compatibility with children and their needs
- confidentiality
- flexibility, friendliness and patience
- a sense of humor
- responsible citizenship qualities

The most-requested form of help from volunteers is tutoring. Tutoring, in which you work with students on a one-to-one basis, provides the most direct and personal contact with young people and is often the most rewarding kind of volunteer activity for both the tutor and the student. Schools welcome volunteers who are interested in reading, math, science, history, geography, languages and other academic subjects, as well as people who can help students work with computers and other office machines, audio-visual equipment and shop machinery and numerous extracurricular activities.

Tutoring can involve a variety of activities, from listening to a child read aloud and sharing effective studying techniques to listening while a teenager talks out a problem that may have little to do with the subject at hand. What is most important in the tutoring process is the relationship that develops between a caring, supportive volunteer and a student who needs attention and encouragement, rather than the volunteer's expertise in the subject matter.

Many teachers use guest speakers, oral history projects and field trips to build students' interest in history, politics and social issues. You can spark young people's curiosity about the past and whet their appetites for the future by sharing stories, photographs, clippings and other memorabilia that describe your travels, your family and your personal history.

A number of national organizations, such as the American Red Cross and the American Heart Association, produce special materials on health, safety, drugs, fire, nutrition and other subjects that are designed for classroom use but which many busy teachers simply cannot spare the time to share with their students. Many teachers are familiar with such materials and how they can be ordered.

Many volunteers like spending time with younger children because of their openness and energy, while others find working with intermediate, middle- or junior-high and high-school students more challenging and rewarding.

In Elementary Schools Volunteers who want to work directly with young children will find an enormous range of opportunities in most elementary schools. You can:

- be a special friend to a lonely child
- help children in the library
- read aloud to students and listen to them read
- practice vocabulary with non-English speaking students
- help children with handwriting and composition
- lead instructional games
- supervise playground activities
- assist gym teachers and athletic coaches
- help with before- and after-school care programs
- lead vocabulary and math drills
- help a child learn a foreign language
- chaperone field trips
- help comfort sick children in the clinic

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- coordinate a writing project and help print a booklet of student stories and poems
- help children learn computer skills
- assist with art, crafts, gardening and cooking projects
- work with handicapped and gifted children
- discuss career and hobbies, traditions and travels
- demonstrate crafts, dancing and musical skills
- show films and slides

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In Secondary Schools Most secondary schools say they particularly welcome volunteers who can tutor students in academic subjects and vocational skills such as accounting, bookkeeping, word processing and construction. However, schools also appreciate help from volunteers with special talents in art and music, dance and drama, who can give demonstrations, help conduct workshops and assist in classrooms and studios.

Students who work on the school newspaper, literary magazine and yearbook always need guidance and ideas from volunteer advisors with knowledge of reporting, photography, graphic design, typesetting, desktop publishing and printing. Some schools encourage volunteers to sponsor after-school clubs, while others have organized "resource banks" of volunteers whom they call upon to make occasional presentations.

Career or job mentors are especially appreciated. You can help teenagers master skills they will need to enter the workforce, help them with job and college applications and give them tips on preparing a resume and interviewing for an entry-level job. You can give them your perspective on the pros and cons of certain fields and areas of expertise, help them broaden their horizons and narrow their career choices—serving as advisor, cheerleader and inside tipster. Such encouragement can help give students much-needed confidence about entering the world of work.

Until the last few decades, the job of a school counselor or nurse seemed fairly tame. Today, counselors and nurses deal with teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol problems and family violence. Many school health clinics and counseling centers welcome help from volunteers who will listen with sympathy and offer comfort and friendship to confused, frightened and lonely young people who have no one they can talk to or trust to keep their secrets.

Students who are in danger of dropping out of school need particular help in coping with problems in their personal lives. Volunteers trained by school professionals can do a great deal to help at-risk teenagers improve their self-esteem, communications skills and grades and manage the pressures that prevent them from succeeding. Older mentors can provide students with an insider's perspective on college life and the world of work while stressing the importance of staying in school and getting good grades.

The Key to Success

Who is the most effective tutor and mentor? Surprisingly, it is often not the person who we think of as conventionally successful, but rather the person who has experienced and overcome difficulties and disappointments. Teenagers, in particular, seem to benefit more from talking with someone who says, "I know just what you mean; that happened to me once," than with a person who has a hard time hiding a shocked expression or stifling a judgmental comment. Successful volunteers make commitments over a sustained period of time, can be trusted to keep appointments and secrets, listen with an open mind and give freely of their affection, support and encouragement.

Volunteering is not always convenient and there is no such thing as a quick fix or instant success when you are dealing with young people who need help. "One of the things that these youngsters have shared is their need for stable, ongoing relationships," cautions one older volunteer. "You cannot just drop into their lives and then just disappear again."

Some older people who have regrets about the way they have dealt with young people in the past or who feel they have made mistakes with their own children, find that being a special friend to a

child or a teenager is a chance to make a fresh start. For children who have been neglected, betrayed or abused by an adult, finding an older person who can be trusted and who truly cares about their happiness and achievements can make all the difference in the world.

"I figure that she was just going to be a tutor but she turned out to be more like a friend. Being with her was like getting practice being an adult."

WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES

Rather than working directly with children, some volunteers prefer behind-the-scenes activities that better suit their personalities and skills. You may want to help teachers, librarians and administrators:

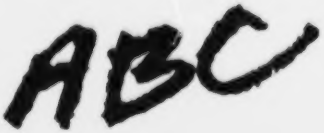
- prepare classroom and assembly materials
- research a specific subject
- organize exhibits and bulletin board displays
- make props and build sets for plays
- catalog and repair books in the library
- set up science experiments
- operate audio-visual equipment
- help recruit, train and arrange transportation for school volunteers
- work with the school system's public relations director, PTA or school board to increase community support for the schools
- coordinate fundraising projects to buy school equipment and finance enrichment activities
- organize book sales, fairs, auctions and other special events
- help produce a parents' newsletter
- serve on special committees

Older people who are homebound or in nursing homes can contribute a great deal by working at home. Volunteer program staff can deliver materials and pick up finished projects such as bulletin board displays, notebooks and scrapbooks, holiday decorations, costumes and props for school plays. In addition, some programs allow older persons to be special telephone friends to "latchkey" children who are at home alone for several hours after school.

HOW TO GET STARTED

If you have a particular school in mind for your volunteer work, call the principal directly. If you are interested in finding out about the range of volunteer opportunities in your local school district, call the school superintendent's office and ask to speak to the school system's volunteer coordinator. These are the people who generally train and supervise individual school volunteers, so they know the particular requirements of each school and how best to match your interests and skills to their needs.

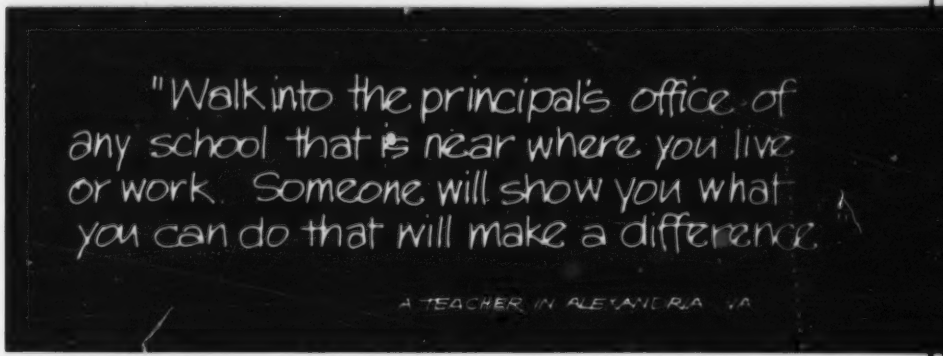
In addition, your community may have one or more school volunteer programs sponsored by a local volunteer center or clearinghouse, the PTA, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), your local AARP chapter, a Retired Teachers Association unit or other civic or business group. Volunteer program sponsors generally work closely with area schools, gathering information on each school's specific needs; making sure that the school can provide you with the orientation, training, evaluation, support and recognition that you need and deserve; and guiding you to a volunteer assignment that best suits your interests and strengths.



Whether you enter the system through a school principal, the school system's volunteer coordinator or a community volunteer program, you will probably be interviewed at the school, attend one or more orientation sessions and undergo training before you are ready to begin your volunteer activities.

Research studies and the experience of thousands of volunteers and volunteer program administrators show that, in order to be effective, school volunteer programs and their staffs must be sensitive to the needs of older volunteers and must adequately prepare volunteers, teachers, administrators and coordinators. Orientation and training are essential for all concerned.

If you have specific skills or knowledge that you would like to pass along to children or if you have a strong preference about the kind of volunteer work you would like to do, say so. Program coordinators know that a good match between a volunteer and an assigned activity is essential to the success of all volunteer efforts; they welcome volunteers who know their strengths and express their preferences.


"Walk into the principal's office of any school that is near where you live or work. Someone will show you what you can do that will make a difference."
A TEACHER IN ALEXANDRIA, VA

Before your first interview, do some thinking about what kind of assignment best suits you. You might want to answer these questions:

- What interests and skills would you like to share with young people?
- Do you have a hobby or work experience that would be interesting and helpful to students?
- Would you like to share stories, photos and other life experiences?
- What age group would you feel comfortable with?
- Would you like to work with mentally or physically challenged students? Young people with special talents?
- Would you like to work with individual students, with groups of young people or with teachers and other school staff behind the scenes?
- What kind of commitment can you make to a short-term or long-term assignment? How many hours each week can you spend working with students? Would you prefer morning or afternoon?

During your interview, learn as much as you can about the school volunteer program and what is expected of you. You might ask the program coordinator the following questions:

- Do you have written guidelines and rules?
- How often do you need me—how many hours a week or month?
- How long will this assignment last?
- How will you review and evaluate my performance?
- Does the program help volunteers with transportation arrangements or costs, provide lunch and make the teachers' lounge or another school room available for breaks and conversation?
- How does the school recognize and reward volunteers?

If there is no written job description, ask for a verbal one and take notes that you can refer to later. A job description should answer the following questions:

- What are my specific responsibilities and where do they begin and end?
- What is the chain of command? Who supervises my activities?
- What are the qualifications for this assignment? Does it require any special training?

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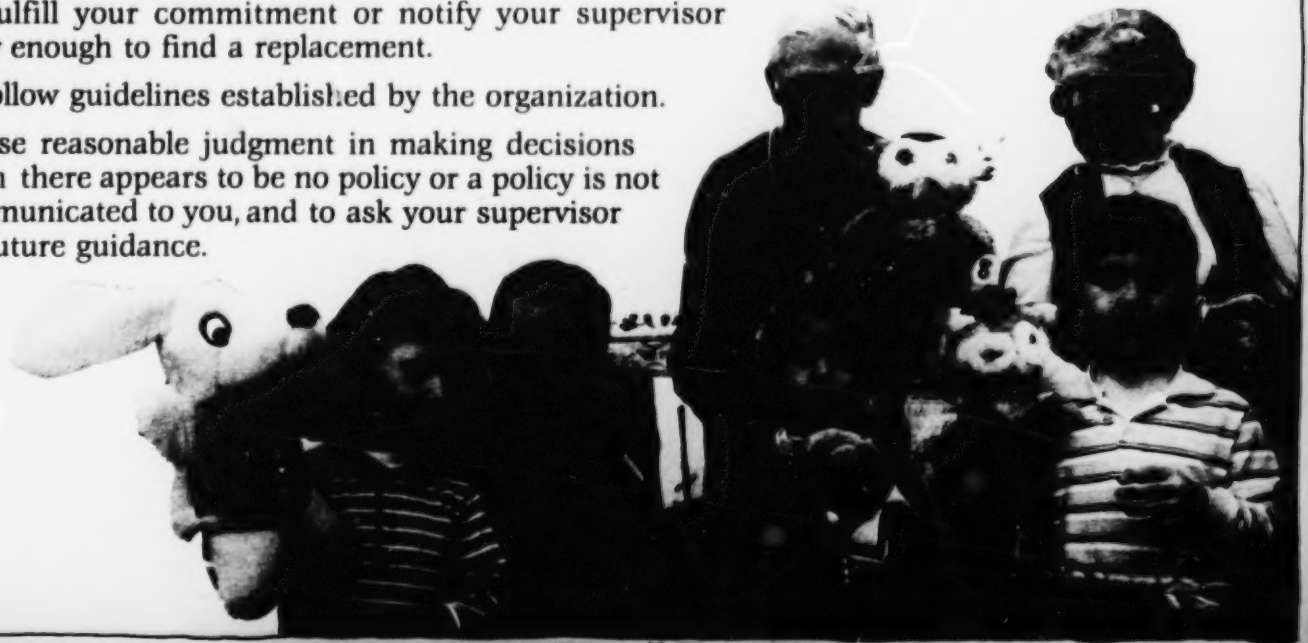
- Does the school have liability insurance for volunteers? Am I adequately insured under the school's liability policy while I'm working as a volunteer? Do you see any reason why I might need to increase my personal insurance coverage during my volunteer assignment? (The National Association of Partners in Education offers no-cost liability insurance for school volunteers as part of the cost of membership. See the Resources section for more information.)

Most schools will do their best to honor your gift of time and talent by treating you with respect and consideration. You should also expect:

- a suitable assignment—with consideration for personal preference, temperament, life experience, education and employment and background;
- a place to work—an orderly designated place that is conducive to work and worthy of the job to be done; and,
- recognition of your work—through various expressions of appreciation.

Just as you have these rights as a volunteer, you also have responsibilities. An organization called Volunteer—the National Center includes the following in its list of volunteer rights and responsibilities:

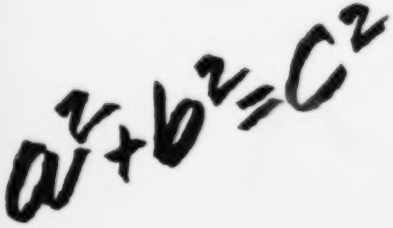
- To accept an assignment of your choice with only as much responsibility as you can handle.
- To fulfill your commitment or notify your supervisor early enough to find a replacement.
- To follow guidelines established by the organization.
- To use reasonable judgment in making decisions when there appears to be no policy or a policy is not communicated to you, and to ask your supervisor for future guidance.



- To keep any biases from interfering with your job performance, to refrain from lecturing and avoid pressuring anyone to accept your standards.
- To respect others' experience and work as a team with school staff and other volunteers.
- To respect the privacy of those you serve and any confidential information supplied by the program sponsor.

Remember that it will probably take some time to get used to your volunteer tasks. Like any new role, volunteering has its challenges as well as its rewards, and you should try not to judge your success or failure by your experiences in the first few days or weeks.

Just as you may be unsure about some of the staff and young people you meet at school, some teachers and students may have similar doubts about your role at first. A teacher might worry that you will try to take over part of her job, for example, or a student may test your sincerity. However, if you are dependable, consistent and enthusiastic from the start, you will soon earn respect and appreciation from those with whom you work.



As you will learn, school volunteer work can bring you new friends and add new meaning and satisfaction to your life. And the encouragement, affection and skills you can give to young people are priceless gifts, a lasting legacy passed on to the next generation.

RESOURCES

To learn more about school volunteer programs in your community, contact one or more of the following persons or organizations:

- the school system's volunteer coordinator, who can usually be reached through the school superintendent's office
- the principal of the school in which you would like to volunteer
- your community's volunteer center or volunteer clearinghouse
- the Retired Senior Volunteer Program.

If no school volunteer program exists in your community, you may choose to approach the principal, the school superintendent or the school board and offer your services to develop such a program.

The following national organizations also promote or sponsor school volunteer programs in communities around the country. Many of them publish newsletters and other materials.

Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), ACTION
1100 Vermont Avenue, NW • Room 6100
Washington, DC 20525 • (202) 634-9353

Nearly 400,000 older Americans are involved in RSVP's 750 community volunteer projects across the U.S. sponsored by a variety of local and county government agencies, colleges, religious organizations, charities and service groups.

Your local Retired Senior Volunteer Program should be listed in your telephone book. General information about RSVP is available from the program's Washington, DC headquarters.

National Association of Partners in Education (NAPE)
601 Wythe Street, Suite 200
Alexandria, VA 22314 • (703) 836-4880

This organization is the professional association for administrators of school volunteer and partnership programs nationwide. Its National School Volunteer Program Division has supported school volunteer programs for more than 20 years, serving as a bridge between schools, individual volunteers, community groups and businesses that "adopt" local schools. NAPE also offers $1 million in liability insurance for volunteers working in the schools as part of the cost of individual membership ($10.00 a year). Contact them if you wish to join their national network of school volunteers.

Volunteer—The National Center
1111 North 19th Street • Suite 500
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